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Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence

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Although Gandhi is often taken to be an exemplary moral idealist in politics, this article seeks to demonstrate that Gandhian nonviolence is premised on a form of political realism, specifically a contextual, consequentialist, and moral-psychological analysis of a political world understood to be marked by inherent tendencies toward conflict, domination, and violence. By treating nonviolence as the essential analog and correlative response to a realist theory of politics, one can better register the novelty of satyagraha *(nonviolent action) as a practical orientation in politics as opposed to a moral proposition, ethical stance, or standard of judgment. The singularity of* satyagraha *lays in its* self-limiting *character as a form of political action that seeks to constrain the negative consequences of politics while working toward progressive social and political reform. Gandhian nonviolence thereby points toward a transformational realism that need not begin and end in conservatism, moral equivocation, or pure instrumentalism.*

Political realism typically includes two interconnected claims: a view of politics in which power and conflict are taken to be constitutive and a suspicion of doctrines and theories that elide this fact as carelessly idealist or utopian. Realism is often equated with a kind of Machiavellianism, a hard-nosed insistence that norms of ordinary, individual, and/or legal morality have to be relaxed or superseded in the face of the contingency of political conflict or the intractability of ideological struggle.[1] Here, realism reaches its denouement in the defense of power politics, reason of state, or *Realpolitik* as the optimal way to navigate the political world. However, alongside this more grimly celebratory realism—itself a kind of idealization of the efficacy of political power—lineages of other realisms can be discerned in Thucydides, Hobbes, and especially the eighteenth-century liberalism of Montesquieu, Hume, Madison, and Burke, thinkers who likewise provide sober assessments of the passions, vices, and enthusiasms that drive political conflict and competition but aim to restrain and moderate rather than extol them (Bourke 2007; 2009; Sabl 2002; 2011; Shklar 1984; 1989; Whelan 2004; Williams 2005b). That is, although both traditions of realism reject the search for ideal political institutions in favor of a science of politics that emphasizes the play of passions and interests over ideal motivation, moral education, and rational agreement, they do so for markedly different reasons. For the tradition of moderating realism, the potential incompatibility between idealist moralism and practical politics concerns less the supposed inefficacy of strict moral codes in politics—what might be construed as the standard Machiavellian dilemma—than the ways in which absolutist ethics, ideological certitude, and utopian schemes can threaten political order and lead to unrestrained uses of power. This moderating realism therefore works through a broadly negative ethical horizon, orienting itself toward the prevention of civil breakdown, violence, cruelty, and domination over and against positive attempts to transform or perfect citizens and polities. In its theoretical understanding, practical orientation, and intended effects, Gandhi's politics—the politics of nonviolence—converges with but also points beyond this tradition of moderating realism.

A new call for realism has recently emerged in political theory, one that more loosely and eclectically builds on earlier Machiavellian, Marxist, and liberal realisms.[2] It too raises the familiar charge of excessive idealism and moralism, but directs it against the methods and aims of dominant strains of contemporary political philosophy, especially liberal theories of justice (in the Rawlsian tradition) and, to a lesser extent, the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas. Raymond Geuss

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[1] Although Machiavelli is the inevitable touchstone here, Lenin and Schmitt might also be seen as purveyors of this harder edged political realism. In the latter cases, as well as in the broader range of Marxist realisms, idealist moralism is criticized for being not only ineffective (e.g., the case of utopian socialism) but also ideological and itself a justificatory discourse of and for power (i.e., the case of liberalism), to which a kind of revolutionary and radical *Realpolitik* is seen as the appropriate response (see Geuss 2008, 23–33; cf. Bolsinger 2001).

[2] In twentieth-century political science, realism came to prominence as a field-defining approach to the study of international relations, one that privileged power and interest and, in the classic works of E. H. Carr (1946) and Hans Morgenthau (1948), emerged as a critique of liberal, utopian, and moralist approaches. Here, again, we might contrast Carr's realist critique of the naiveté (and therefore catastrophic inefficacy) of the liberal idealism of the interwar years to Morgenthau's realism, which recommended a rational theory of national interest to avoid the excesses of ideologically driven foreign policy. See Morgenthau's critique of U.S. action in Southeast Asia along these lines (1970). On the newer invocations of a realist political theory, see Galston's overview (2010) in the special issue of *European Journal of Political Theory* devoted to the latest turn to political realism.

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and Bernard Williams—two thinkers most closely identified with the call for a new political realism—have objected to the ways in which contemporary political philosophers treat political theory as a form of applied moral philosophy, in which a distinctive kind of normative theorizing takes precedence over all other forms of criticism, evaluation, and understanding. What they ask for, instead, is a bottom-up approach, in which political theory would begin from an understanding of the existing conditions and constraints of political life, rather than a top-down method in which theoretical resolutions to political conflict are sought prior to and in abstraction from the work of politics (Geuss 2008; Williams 2005a; 2005b).

For Williams, both contemporary utilitarians and contractarians embody a form of political moralism, in which the moral is given priority over the political. In the case of utilitarianism, politics comes into play as the means to secure antecedently established ethical principles and values, whereas in social contract models morality is meant to provide pre-political, structural constraints on the legitimate exercise of power (2005a, 1–2). In both cases, the sphere of political activity seems inessential and external to the nature of norms and their realization. Geuss's understanding and worry about moralism are more broad-ranging; for him the dominance of what he terms the "ethics-first" approach to politics and political theory may be part of a wider cultural-ideological condition in which academic moralism finds its real-world analogs in the reckless absolutisms of a George Bush or Tony Blair (2008; 2010b). Ultimately, for Geuss, moralism stems from and contributes to a serious confusion about the task of political theory. When that task is primarily construed in terms of norm generation and justification—that is, in terms of a general ethical theory from which principles of conduct or institutional norms are deduced—this very orientation toward systematicity and universality necessarily works at a remove from the unstable, conflict-ridden, imperfect world of "real politics" (2008). Neither Geuss nor Williams eschews normativity altogether in favor of a pure inductive political science, but both seek to tie normativity more closely to empirical and historical contexts, to real constraints and real possibilities.[3]

In their concern about the unreality of political philosophy, Geuss and Williams join a larger chorus of critics who have likewise decried the tendency of academic political theory—especially so-called "high liberalism"—to ignore, misunderstand, or actively evade politics (Honig 1993; Mouffe 1993; Newey 2001; cf. Dunn 2000; Isaacs 1995; Shapiro 2005). Yet there is a lingering reticence about what the turn to realism actually entails. That is, realism's main contributions seem negative, as perhaps a needed and blunt corrective, but as yet very far from offering a genuinely alternative mode of political theorizing. One important source for this reticence lies in a recurring objection to realism in both its classical and more recent formulations. Critics worry that the rejection of normativity as traditionally conceived—namely, the strict dichotomy between *is* and *ought* that is characteristic of Kantian and neo-Kantian thinking—undermines the possibility of normatively driven criticism of existing political arrangements and thereby signals a bias in favor of the status quo (Freeman 2009; Honig and Stears 2011). Moderating realisms are perhaps especially susceptible to the charge of conservatism, given their traditional emphasis on questions of political stability, order, and moderation over and against, for example, justice and revolution.[4] The anxiety can equally stem from exactly the kind of methodological correctives envisioned by Geuss and Williams: The turn to anti-ideal, bottom-up, or immanent theorizing is seen to tether political possibilities too closely to the given coordinates of political life and thereby tends toward a naturally conservative, even pessimistic, outlook. Worst still, if politics is understood as determining, partly or wholly, its own internal standards of evaluation, it opens the door to harder edged realisms that dispense with the category of morality altogether.

These are strong challenges and important worries, but, as I show, they can be met or at least displaced to make room for another realism, one that neither forsakes an agenda of reform nor sacrifices ethics at the altar of power politics. In this reconstruction of realism, I enlist a seemingly unlikely candidate—M. K. Gandhi. Gandhian nonviolence is often taken as an exemplar of pure conviction politics. Indeed, among both critics and defenders, there is a tendency to characterize Gandhi as a moral idealist or absolutist,[5] as someone who rejected utilitarian/Machiavellian political thinking in which ends justify means and, instead, evoked strict ethical limits to legitimate political action.

[3] As Honig and Stears (2011) have noted, Williams is much less suspicious of normative theory in general. But see especially Menke's (2010) excellent elaboration of Geuss's critique of "normativism," as well as the overall character of his realism.

[4] I use *conservatism* less in the sense of political attitudes on a conventional right–left spectrum, but rather to mark a philosophical orientation to the mechanisms of sociopolitical change. Here, conservatism refers to a skepticism toward transformative and revolutionary politics, the violence and upheaval they unleash, as well as their sustaining dispositions, ideologies, and ontologies. This skepticism can traverse the political spectrum; for instance, Hannah Arendt (1963) and Michael Oakeshott ([1962] 1991), despite divergent political affiliations, shared a critical-conservative stance toward particular forms of revolutionary politics. In addition, the contrast with the immoderation of hard-edged realism is instructive; its adherents from both right and left tend to align themselves with radical-revolutionary politics.

[5] Iyer (1973) is the classic statement of Gandhi as a moral idealist along Kantian lines. Recent work on Gandhi's political thought, especially Mehta (2010a; 2010b), Bilgrami (2003; 2009), Skaria (2002), Devji (2005; 2010), and Howes (2009), has been productively moving away from the more traditional assumption of Gandhi's idealism. Although some of this work has sought to render Gandhi's originality in terms of ethical as opposed to straightforwardly political practice, the novel reconsideration of Gandhi's critique of modern (liberal) politics and modern practices of judgment advanced by these scholars is especially cogent and important. In this article I connect these insights to and situate them within an older literature on the theory and practice of nonviolence, such as the seminal work of Gregg (1935), Shridharani (1939), Bondurant (1958), Horsburgh (1968), and Sharp (1973; 1979), to re-signify the theoretical relevance of Gandhi's politics and political thinking.

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From this angle, Gandhi appears as primarily a political moralist—a moral critic of politics and an advocate of a severe political morality. However, this view underplays the extent to which Gandhi's politics were sustained not only by the strength of moral convictions but also by sharp political analysis and judgment. Indeed, I contend that Gandhi's understanding of politics was fundamentally realist, and it is this underlying realism that renders nonviolence a plausible practical orientation in politics and not purely a moral proposition, ethical stance, or standard of judgment.

To think of Gandhi as a realist implies more than an acknowledgment of his skill as a political leader and strategist. To be sure, Gandhi was a much more pragmatic politician than is usually assumed in the popular image of the saint-as-politician (see Brown 1972; 1977; Dalton 1993; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). However, I invoke the term "realism" to register a *theoretical* coherence in Gandhi's understanding of politics: an orientation and view of the political world that would place Gandhian politics squarely within the ambit of political realism.[6] Specifically, Gandhi's political thinking involved several substantive theses about politics that resonate especially strikingly with the tradition of moderating realism referred to earlier. At the core of Gandhi's realist theory of politics was a contextual, consequentialist, and moral-psychological analysis of a political world understood to be marked by inherent tendencies toward conflict, domination, and violence. Animated by a powerful negative horizon of violence, Gandhi was attuned to the unintended consequences of political action, especially the ways in which idealism and moralism, despite the best of intentions, could enable ideological escalation and violence. This understanding of the sources and legitimation of violence was tied to a moral psychology that emphasized the causal force of affect—of pride and egotism—over reason and rationality in political conflict. Thus, Gandhi's open opposition to Machiavellian and utilitarian ethics, rather than signaling moral absolutism or idealism, in fact drew him closer to another kind of realism. What distinguishes Gandhi's realism from other moderating realisms is its ability to blend a negative, even conservative, orientation against violence with a progressive program of sociopolitical transformation. The novelty of Gandhian *satyagraha* (nonviolent action) lies in its *self-limiting* character; it is a form of action that seeks both to constrain the negative consequences of politics and work toward the reform of existing political relations and institutions.

[6] Terchek is alone in explicitly characterizing Gandhi as a political realist. Although he does not explore the realist angle in detail—it comes in the epilogue to a book that primarily focuses on Gandhi's theory of autonomy in the face of modernity—Terchek suggestively notes that Gandhi's "civic realism" took seriously the ways in which "power is unavoidable, seductive, and important" (1998, 232–34). Howes (2009) is the most sophisticated and extended attempt to recover the practical aspects of Gandhi's philosophy along broadly realist lines (although he does not evoke the term "realism" in the same theoretical sense I do). Howes tries to deemphasize what he takes to be moral and spiritual aspects of Gandhian nonviolence in an effort to formulate a more "credible pacifism" that is grounded in a realistic and theoretically nuanced analysis of political violence.

The central contention of this article is that exploring the convergence between Gandhian politics and political realism offers key insights into both phenomena. First, we understand the nature and distinctiveness of Gandhian politics more deeply when placed in this tradition. The novelty of nonviolent action is put into sharp relief when viewed as the essential analog and correlative response to a realist theory of politics. The article therefore begins by reconstructing the key components of Gandhi's theory of politics, focusing on what Gandhi understood to be the sources and dynamics of violence and escalation in politics. The next section turns to the analysis of *satyagraha* and considers why and under what conditions nonviolent action, according to Gandhi, could counteract the tendencies toward coercion inherent in politics. I specify two aspects of the politics of nonviolence: its general principles and the strategic-situational contexts that both define *satyagraha* and render it effective. In conclusion, I suggest that if we, with Gandhi, take political action, rather than the construction and legitimation of norms, as the starting point of politics and political theorizing, the realist call to attend closely to dynamics of power, conflict, and domination can be mobilized on behalf of principled and progressive politics. This reading of Gandhi thereby seeks to enable another realism that can navigate a way out of its traditional impasses, a transformational realism that need not begin and end in conservatism, moral equivocation, or pure instrumentalism.

INTERACTION AND THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE: GANDHI'S THEORY OF POLITICS

The Problem of Idealism

Gandhi famously claimed that he was "not a visionary" but rather a "practical idealist" ([1920e] 1999, 134). A practical orientation to politics, which put ideals into practice, was understood as one that turned fundamentally on the problem of political means. In politics, Gandhi contended, "means are after all everything" ([1924b] 1999, 310); they not only shape the realization of political ends but are also implicated in the very nature of political conflict. As is often recognized, the call to scrupulously attend to the question of means was a sharp rejection of the logic of expediency in politics. Gandhi considered modern politics to be saturated by a kind of instrumentalist, means–ends thinking, in which violence and coercion had become widely permissible and explicitly defended as legitimate. However, the rejection of instrumentalist calculation in politics, and more broadly the "doctrine of the sword . . . in this age of the rule of brute force" ([1920e] 1999, 133), was not only directed at a kind of prosaic Machiavellianism. The risk of sliding into rationalizations of political violence was just as acute for political idealisms in which right or noble ends work to enable, justify, or redeem

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the use of dubious political means.[7] It is important to keep in mind the extent to which Gandhi's political thinking was animated and framed by a continual worry about the potential for violence in the gamut of idealist enthusiasms—from anarchist nationalism, aggressive religious revivalism, to revolutionary Marxism—that shaped the ideological landscape of Indian anticolonial politics.[8] Indeed, *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi's famous 1909 tract on Indian home rule, was occasioned by and structured as an argument with militant nationalism and its recommended tactic of the time, the targeted political assassination.

In Gandhian terms, the signature failing of political idealism is its focus on *ends* at the expense of *means*.[9] This disjuncture between means and ends is associated with two kinds of political hazards. First, the commitment to ideals when detached from a specification of means is subject to a distinct form of moral erosion; namely, it can have a morally disinhibiting effect on its proponents.[10] "[T]o serve the noblest of causes," political idealism becomes susceptible to taking and legitimating "short-violent-cuts to success" ([1924c] 1999, 442). The temptation to use any and all available means for even small or temporary gains seemingly becomes greater in proportion to one's belief in and attachment to ends. The dynamic may actually function in the reverse; that is, it might be precisely because the gains are small or nonexistent (or even negative and deleterious) that insisting on the rightness of principles becomes ever more politically urgent. In either case, the exaltation of ends becomes all too easily implicated in the justification of various forms of political coercion.

Second, idealism can facilitate tendencies toward ideological entrenchment in politics. Where previously the strong attachment to principles papered over corrosive moral compromises, here the worry is that when political disagreements are framed as arguments over fundamental principles, the potential for political progress may dissipate in an atmosphere of increasing hostility and polarization. Consider Gandhi's response to Nehru's entreaty in 1933 to define more sharply the egalitarian goals of the Indian National Congress's future economic policy:

> I know that though there is such an agreement between you and me in the enunciation of ideals, there are temperamental differences between us. Thus you have emphasized the necessity of a clear statement of the goal, but having once determined it, I have never attached importance to the repetition. The clearest possible definition of the goal and its appreciation would fail to take us there if we do not know and utilize the means of achieving it. I have, therefore, concerned myself principally with the conservation of the means and their progressive use. I know that if we can take care of them, attainment of the goal is assured. I feel too that our progress towards the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of our means. If we can give an ocular demonstration of our uttermost truthfulness and non-violence, I am convinced that our statement of the national goal cannot long offend the interests which your letter would appear to attack. We know that the princes, the zamindars, and those who depend for their existence upon the exploitation of the masses, would cease to fear and distrust us, if we could but ensure the innocence of our methods. We do not seek to coerce any. We seek to convert them. This method may appear to be long, perhaps too long, but I am convinced that it is the shortest. ([1933b] 1999, 393)

What Gandhi termed his "temperamental differences" with Nehru are couched in terms of a broader statement about why the clarification of goals "would fail to take us there" without a serious consideration of effective means. More subtly, Gandhi implied that the ways in which ends are invoked, presented, and insisted on can themselves engender resistance; that is, they may prove counterproductive to the process of converting natural opponents to the cause of reform. At the extreme, an uncompromising insistence on ideals may not only lead to the use of coercion but may also slide into a moralistic politics of conviction or ideological dogmatism that, for Gandhi, were especially liable to breed contempt and engender a logic of escalation.

Importantly, in both these scenarios, the actual *processes* of political interaction and contestation, especially the subjective-psychological investments and reactions they provoke, are seen to objectively threaten the attainability of ends advanced. The practical and moral hazards of political idealism—the moral erosion that leads to the use of coercive tactics and forms of contestation that produce an atmosphere of hostility—point to what Gandhi took to be acute dangers inherent in the very practice of politics. In other words, Gandhi's insistent call to attend to "the conservation

[7] In the midst of an abstract discussion about whether killing could ever be conceived of as a duty (i.e., for the protection of others), Gandhi made this observation: "Few men are wantonly wicked. The most heinous and most cruel crimes of which history has record have been committed under cover of religion or equally other noble motive" ([1927] 1999, 184).

[8] For Gandhi, *idealism* was a not term of abuse or criticism, although he often tried to signal its limitations and offered his own "intensely practical" idealism as an example of how principles ought to be given a definite, practical shape in political work and action. The interpretation here of Gandhi's worry about idealism is pieced together from the manner in which he criticized and debated some of his main political rivals, namely, adherents of movements that seemed to combine a (misplaced) faith in the efficacy of violence with ostensibly "noble" political motives. I explore later some of the ways that Gandhi understood this coincidence or commingling of principle and violence to be linked to corrupting forms of self-righteousness, vanity, and egotism.

[9] Mehta (2010a) has made the most forceful case for viewing Gandhi's political thinking and practice as premised on a stark rejection of the "inherent idealism" of modern politics. For Mehta, idealism is necessarily tied to a teleology that gives meaning to political action only in relation to its contribution to the realization of final ends such as progress, peace, and security and thus renders all politics instrumental to those ends.

[10] Following Horsburgh (1968, 41–53), I adopt the term "moral erosion" to signify the process through which increasing conflict loosens moral constraints. What is at issue is less the mere fact of positing ideals in politics than their disassociation from the means of realization. Mehta tends to emphasize the former in his understanding of Gandhi's anti-idealism and therefore sees Gandhi as more starkly rejecting all politics oriented toward transformative ends. In these terms, Mehta provocatively asks us to consider Gandhi "not just as having a very different politics, but rather, in some crucial sense, as being a deeply anti-political thinker" (2010a, 363).

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of the means and their progressive use" is closely tied to a view of politics as a realm marked by recalcitrance and tendencies toward conflict and violence. Pointing to idealism's indifference to political means is therefore another way of signaling its larger blindness to the internal dynamics of political life that shape the realization of ends.

Idealisms, old and new, have a difficult time thinking conceptually about the practical constraints of political activity. This is indeed one of the most insistent charges made by the new realists; namely that contemporary political philosophy does not dwell long enough on problems of implementation, especially political impediments to implementation (Geuss 2008; Williams 2005b). More often, political philosophy assumes or envisions apolitical or extrapolitical models of how ideal theory could be enacted in the world. For instance, when political conflict is understood as a contestation over rival conceptions of the good or the just, the search for consensus or agreement becomes the presumed solution to the problems of politics. Here, educative models, in which public reason through debate and discussion is thought to lead to the dissemination and transformation of political values, take the place of politics. Alternatively, political theory speaks in the voice of the state or from a position of power, concerning itself with outlining legislation or policy along proposed normative guidelines. As Williams has noted, the implied reader or "listener"—whether it is a Supreme Court Justice or high-level policy maker – is here akin to the omnipotent legislator or founder; that is, someone who functions with as few "purely political restrictions" as possible (2005b, 57–58). To critics, these assumptions are taken to exemplify political philosophy's, and especially contemporary liberalism's, tendency toward the evasion of politics.[11] This evasion might also be understood as an absence of a *theory* of politics in the sense that liberal philosophy lacks a theoretical account of political constraints, contestation, and resistance and of what to do in the face of recalcitrance (whether conceived in terms of party dynamics, entrenched interests, or ideological recalcitrance).

A realist theory of politics focuses not only on how political processes affect the realization of political goals but also sees the dynamics of political interactions as radically reformulating political possibilities. The extent to which Gandhi had a clear and distinct theory of politics with strong realist undertones has been, to my mind, drastically undervalued. This realism is the essential counterpart to a means orientation in politics as well as the practical grounds of the politics of nonviolence. Gandhi's theory of politics focuses on the moral-psychological dimension of political interaction and contestation, especially the tensions and temptations that propelled modern politics in the direction of escalating conflict and violence. My claim here is not that Gandhi's understanding of these dynamics is convincing in every detail or that it is the only plausible realist theory available. Rather, exploring Gandhi's understanding reveals a great deal about what nonviolence entails as a practical political orientation and as a set of strategic responses rather than simply an ethical stance or standard of moral judgment. The two interrelated aspects of Gandhi's theory of politics to which I wish to draw attention are the origins and legitimation of violence and the dynamics of escalation. In sum, they represent the twin dangers of political life. Thus Gandhi's challenge was to demonstrate how *satyagraha* could appropriately respond to these dangers; that is, how it could work as a mode of effective political action that neither enabled escalation nor justified and reenacted coercion.

Cycles of Violence

For Gandhi, at the metaphysical level, *himsa* or violence is an ever-present feature of life. In Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist thinking, *himsa* is understood as harm or injury to any living being. In what is usually considered the most radical interpretation of the doctrine, Jain monks take great care to only eat food prepared by others, clear walking paths of insects before treading, and filter water or wear masks to avoid destroying microscopic life, all the while accepting that some forms of injury are unavoidable. Gandhi similarly took the fact that basic bodily functions necessarily involved *himsa* as a sign of its ineradicability. One common ethical response to the problem of *himsa* is the renunciation of action, an imperative to make one's footprint in the world as infinitesimal as possible and to practice a variety of forms of nonattachment to body and world. In contrast, Gandhi held to a notion of renunciation that "should be sought for in and through action" ([1928b] 1999, 131). The answer was not a negative withdrawal from the world, but rather a form of detached or selfless action that aimed at actively minimizing harm and suffering (Gier 2004, 28–39, 51–65).

Gandhi's turning of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) outward, as an imperative to relieve worldly suffering, signaled a much broader understanding of the sources and consequences of *himsa*. In translating the metaphysical doctrine into avowedly social and political terms, Gandhi effectively reinvented the theory of *ahimsa* in a manner that often dismayed traditional adherents (see Parekh 1989b, 120–55). Gandhi was often piqued by dogmatic forms of *ahimsa* that "made non-killing a blind fetish" and were seemingly motivated more by the care of one's soul than the suffering of others:

> The current (and in my opinion, mistaken) view of *ahimsa* has drugged our conscience and rendered us insensible to a host of other and more insidious forms of *himsa* like harsh words, harsh judgments, ill-will, anger and spite and lust for cruelty; it has made us forget that there may be far more *himsa* in the slow torture of men and animals, the starvation and exploitation to which they are subjected out of selfish greed, the wanton humiliation and oppression of the weak and the killing of their self-respect that we witness all around us today. ([1928a] 1999, 59)

[11] For many critics, such as Mouffe (1993), Honig (1993), and Newey (2001), the rejection of politics is partly a symptom of a deeper liberal impulse that takes the overcoming or suppression of politics as its telos.

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Based on this more expansive understanding of *himsa*, Gandhi came to emphasize *structural* aspects of violence in a host of social, economic, and political institutions. He famously declared the modern state to represent "violence in a concentrated and organized form" ([1934] 1999, 318), exemplified both in its coercive capacity to enforce obedience and in its tendency toward centralization and hierarchy (Mantena n.d.). Likewise, he took industrial economies to be premised on institutional centralization, exploitation, and inequality.

What concerns us here, more than its structural aspects, is violence as a dynamic feature of political contestation. For Gandhi, political action—like all action—intervenes in a complex causal web. Action initiates irreversible chains of cause and effect, which Gandhi understood to be so intricate as to be unknowable and therefore unmasterable in any deep or final sense.[12] The *political* analog of the metaphysical problem of *himsa* was therefore an understanding of politics as necessarily interactive and deeply consequentialist, where chains of intentionality and responsibility reverberate in unforeseen and unintended ways. One fundamental implication of this view is that individual will, intention, or motive alone cannot fully exhaust, master, or determine the outcomes of political action.[13] To admit indeterminacy in the face of the interactive logic of politics, however, is not to foreswear attempts to shape political trajectories. Here the analogy with Gandhi's response to *himsa* assumes added force: Rather than abjuring the consequentialism of politics and recommending withdrawal, Gandhi put forward a model of self-limiting action, action that could do as much as possible to internally constrain these negative effects and still work toward positive political goals.

Consequentialism[14] of this kind demands attention to the mechanisms that interactively shape political outcomes, especially the recurring *entailments* of political action. By entailments, I mean effects and consequences of particular kinds of political action that may not be logically given in the nature of political ideals or intended by political actors but nevertheless regularly recur as their reactive outcome. For Gandhi, the problem of political entailment was especially acute in the case of violence, for in being an absolute, irreversible deed, violence initiates definite dynamics of resentment, retrenchment, and retaliation—or what is often prosaically referred to as the *cycle of violence*. Even when committed for the sake of justice or a final peace, violence necessarily puts into motion chains of animus and dissension that ultimately result in instability. Overt violence was merely an extreme instance on what was, for Gandhi, a very expansive spectrum of forms of force, domination, coercion, and imposition that themselves seemed definitive of modern politics. Even ostensibly mild forms of coercion—for example, when a democratic majority adopts legislation that is unpalatable to a minority—can initiate similar dynamics of antipathy and hostility that likewise lead to insecure and illegitimate outcomes.

The subjective—or moral-psychological dimension—of violence is equally important in the manner of its justification. Implicit in the turn to violence is a claim to infallibility; according to Gandhi, however, human beings were "not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish" ([1921b] 1999, 451). Gandhi's objection here is often construed as an *epistemological* critique of violence, founded on a conception of truth as many-sided.[15] Yet for Gandhi, the posture of infallibility was also a moral-psychological one; it was a problem of pride and, at the same time, of weakness and cowardice. The extreme irreversibility of violence demands hubris in its undertaking and in its continued justification, a precarious subjective orientation that makes acknowledging errors of judgment and policy reversals difficult and rare. For Gandhi, the fortitude that accompanies violence was a brittle posturing, a papering over of ego-driven investments. The militant Hindu "who will protect by force of arms a few cows but make away with the butcher" and the militant nationalist "who in order to do supposed good to his country does not mind killing off a few officials. . .are actuated by hatred, cowardice, and fear. Here love of the cow or the country is a vague thing intended to satisfy one's vanity or soothe a stinging conscience" ([1916] 1999, 253–54). Conviction is motivated by a need to protect and project one's self, betraying an egotism grounded in weakness rather than, in Gandhi's terms, a genuine and detached commitment to truth.[16]

Finally, Gandhi was concerned with the long-term, unintended consequences of violence; namely the ways in which violence attains moral and political legitimacy. For Gandhi, when coercion is deemed rightful conduct against recalcitrant opponents or enemies (again, this can apply both to the extreme case of war/revolution or everyday modes of democratic politics), the result is that everyone is more inclined to become power seekers, either for protection or as emulators, and thus all become accustomed to and accept competitive domination as the preeminent mode of modern politics. Far

[12] As he put it in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, "as every part has its place in a machine, every feature has its place in a movement of men, and as a machine is clogged by rust, dirt and the like, so is a movement hampered by a number of factors. We are merely instruments of the Almighty Will and are therefore often ignorant of what helps us forward and what acts as an impediment. We must rest satisfied with a knowledge only of the means, and if these are pure, we can fearlessly leave the end to take care of itself" ([1925c] 1999, 261).

[13] Howes (2009), drawing on Arendt, also emphasizes the unpredictable nature of politics, suggesting that one of the realistic advantages of nonviolence is that it might be better equipped to respond to the challenge of contingency.

[14] Here, I am using *consequentialism* in a nontechnical sense to refer to a view in which consequences are central to political analysis and calculation (rather than to specific moral theories, such as utilitarianism, which judge the moral status of an act based primarily on its consequential effect).

[15] Parekh (1989a, 142–70) is a classic statement, but see Bilgrami's (2003) striking critique.

[16] It is telling that when Gandhi extolled courage and fearlessness as "the most soldierly of a soldier's virtues" they were associated with the willingness to die, to sacrifice one's life, and not with the will and desire to kill, which, on the contrary, were thought to stem from cowardice and weakness ([1916] 1999, 252–53).

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worse than individual acts of violence or demonstrations of force is therefore the universal respect given to the capacity for imposition such that power and domination appear as markers of legitimate authority. This was the foundation of Gandhi's exhortation in *Hind Swaraj* to Indians to find a mode of resisting British rule that did not at the same time emulate (and thereby legitimate) imperial claims to authority. Gandhi famously claimed that "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them" ([1909] 1999, 261). For Gandhi, it was not the mere preponderance of force that brought or kept India under British rule but Indian *weakness*. Emulation and the turn to violence were marks of this weakness; they demonstrated the continued acquiescence to the logic of imperial conquest and legitimated material domination as an acceptable foundation of political authority (see Nandy 1983).

Affect and Escalation

The second feature that was fundamental to Gandhi's understanding of politics was the inherent tendency towards escalation in conflict. The problem of escalation is closely tied to an idea of political action that emphasizes its interactive effect in complex causal sequences. Political conflict, confrontation, and antagonism characteristically proceed through a dynamic logic of actions, reactions, and counter-reactions. Again, for Gandhi, these dynamics of contestation include moral-psychological elements that drive them beyond mere conflicts of interest. The performative aspect of political interaction transforms political actors' motivations and subjective investments. Therefore to speak of the ways in which violence (or coercion or contestation) expectedly leads to forms of entrenchment, resentment, and mutual hostility is to call attention to the central role of affect in political life. As we have seen, Gandhi was especially attuned to this particular dimension and took passions such as pride and egotism—and their derivatives such as anger, ambition, humiliation, insolence, revenge, retaliation, etc.—to be key forces for understanding the structure and psychology of violence and escalation. Thus undercutting or moderating these same passions would be central to the dispositional politics of nonviolence. Humility and fearlessness must be cultivated to avoid the slide into the egotism, hubris, and cowardice that engender violent escalation.

To note the importance of people's emotional and psychological attachment to belief is also to recognize distinct limits to rational persuasion in politics. For Gandhi, political conflicts, even when based in a rational conflict of interest—between landlord and peasant, upper caste and lower caste—have a tendency, in and through contestation, to take on an increasingly ideological character. In particular egoististic passions are activated and heightened when beliefs are questioned and contested, as they inevitably are in the realm of politics. In such situations rational argumentation and moral criticism are ineffectual or, worse still, counterproductive, because repeated attempts to demonstrate the rightness of one's position and the correlative wrongness of one's opponent's elicit resistance. As Bilgrami has provocatively argued, criticism for Gandhi can never be pure in motive, and moralizing criticism directed at others is easily susceptible to corruption (egotistic investments) and has "the potential to generate other psychological attitudes (resentment, hostility) which underlie inter-personal violence" (2003, 4136). Here contestation stirs the passions that more often than not result in entrenchment and escalation rather than moderation and agreement.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi offered the following parable to outline the manner in which a response to injustice can easily lead to an escalation that undoes the conditions of a just resolution. In this example, the dynamic of confrontation begins with a thief illegitimately stealing your property. Full of anger, you resolve to punish the thief who has stolen from you, "not for your own sake, but for the good of your neighbours." You organize an armed band to counterattack; the thief responds defiantly and "collects his brother-robbers" and "pesters your neighbours," who complain that the robber has only resorted to open threats against them "after you declared hostilities against him." You feel badly that you have exacerbated the situation but feel trapped. Knowing you will be "disgraced if you now leave the robber alone," you instead distribute arms to all your neighbors "and so the battle grows . . . the result of wanting to take revenge upon the robber is that you have disturbed the peace; you are in perpetual fear of being robbed and assaulted; your courage has given place to cowardice" ([1909] 1999, 288–89). One of the overt lessons of this story is that choosing the improper means to respond to injustice can have unintended and deleterious consequences: more violence, injustice, and instability. The parable also shows how the investment in and motivation for seeking justice and redress are imbricated in the agent's sense of self such that this investment itself becomes a vehicle for escalation and a barrier to reaching a lasting and just resolution. The attachment to principle, perversely, becomes more important as the consequences become negative or less tangibly beneficial. And principled conviction functions as an alibi for a violence born of weakness.

PRINCIPLES OF NONVIOLENT ACTION

It was in response to this specific understanding of politics—one that emphasizes the dynamics of violence and its legitimation and the tendency toward escalation in political contestation—that Gandhi developed modes of intervening in politics that would constrain and counter the adverse consequences of politics. Gandhi was acutely aware that all political action, even ostensibly nonviolent action, held within itself tendencies toward escalation and latent violence. This was particularly true of collective action, not only when it threatens spontaneous or mob violence but also

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when the sheer strength of numbers does the work of compelling or coercing compliance. Therefore Gandhi's challenge was to create, define, and delineate the conditions through which nonviolent action, especially in its collective form, could mitigate these negative dynamics and repercussions. The term Gandhi invented for the forms of self-limiting political action he proposed and practiced is *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha*, Gandhi insisted, is not simply a species of pacifism, nonresistance, or passive resistance ([1925c] 1999, 94–98). Rather it is open, adversarial, and extra-institutional, a form of direct action that mobilizes and refashions techniques of collective protest to take the place of traditional methods of political violence, as nonviolent equivalents of war and revolution (Horsburgh 1968; Shridharani 1939). Civil disobedience, noncooperation, the boycott, strike, and *hartal* (full work stoppage) are viable forms of *satyagraha* but only when embedded within a robust politics of nonviolence.

Gandhian *satyagraha*, therefore, does not imply one set course of action or a static injunction to restrict action to nonviolence, but rather the strategic interplay of nonviolent techniques, methods, and stances that in themselves have to be as various and dynamic as the nature of political conflict itself. In other words, *satyagraha* is best understood not as a norm but a practice; its "objective is not to assert propositions, but to create possibilities" (Bondurant 1958, vii). As a practice, *satyagraha* functions at two levels, one strategic and situational, and another in terms of general principles and orientation (Bondurant 1958, 36–48, 102–4). Ultimately, what proves to be effective nonviolent action—action that works by transforming the psychological valence of violence in the dynamics of political conflict—turns out to be extremely context dependent (an aspect I explore more fully in the next section). Here I focus on what is arguably the most original aspect of Gandhi's understanding of *satyagraha* as a form of action, namely, its radically *self-limiting* character. I outline the defining principles of *satyagraha* in terms of the orientation, mechanism, and dispositions that render it "a force containing within itself seeds of progressive self-restraint" (Gandhi [1925c] 1999, 174) and thereby the capacity to attenuate coercion and escalation in politics.

Means and Ends

A primary tenet of Gandhi's realism was his insistence on a means orientation to politics. This orientation serves, on the one hand, as an antidote to the kinds of disjunctures between means and ends characteristic of political idealism and of instrumentalism; on the other, it pointedly frames politics in terms of the problems and possibilities of political action. To prioritize means does not dispense with the question of ends, but instead seeks to reformulate its reciprocal relationship to means. Gandhi's understanding of means and ends to be, in his words, "convertible terms" ([1924d] 1999, 497) suggests two kinds of articulations. In its stronger version, convertibility implies a very tight imbrication such that means would have to embody their ends. In *Hind Swaraj*, for example, Gandhi offered an organic metaphor that seemingly so intertwined means and ends that no end could function as such, or ever come to light, if it were not already given in the means used to attain it: "[T]here is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree.... We reap exactly as we sow" ([1909] 1999, 287). In the strong version, then, means are *ends-creative*; action consistent with this view might take the form of exemplary or principled action (in the Arendtian sense), in which the principle or end is expressed and entailed in the act (Horsburgh 1968, 41–53; cf. Dalton 2003). Gandhi's understanding of *swaraj* or self-rule may be the clearest instance of an end that is constitutive of the act itself. As is well known, Gandhi repeatedly distinguished *swaraj* for India from the mere fact of political independence from Britain. Self-rule for Gandhi was premised on a fundamental moral-psychological transformation, an overcoming of fear, and in this sense, it was an immanent achievement that could not be granted or given by the British. Politically, *swaraj* was attained through individual and collective practices of self-rule that worked to make British rule irrelevant. In this, Gandhi contended that "the attempt to win *swaraj* was *swaraj* itself."[17] The need for full convertibility between means and ends is especially urgent in the case of abstract ends such as *swaraj*. Abstract ends need grounding in immediate, intimate, and precise practices[18] as a way to ward off the temptation to look for "short-violent-cuts" for temporary but ultimately self-defeating gains. Gandhi therefore refused any abstraction—temporal or conceptual—of ends from means, because it was precisely that separation that opens up the possibility of coercion, a point Mehta eloquently elaborates (2010a, 369).

In a second and more strategic sense, reciprocity between means and ends implies a vigilance in which it is crucial "to adopt means to fit each case" ([1909] 1999, 288) and creatively enact a variety of nonviolent methods and dispositions to overcome resistance to transformative action—for it is also in the gap between means and ends that projects of political reform and transformation run aground. Here, Gandhi's varied agenda for social and economic reform illustrates well the idea that the means adopted determine the extent to which the goals of reform can be progressively realized. In the case of caste equality or Hindu–Muslim unity—two central components of Gandhi's constructive program—means and ends come together in that the transformation of relations of mistrust, domination, and inequality is at once both the goal and mechanism of reform. Moreover, in enacting reform—as well as the collective goal of self-rule—political action takes

[17] In this vein, Devji discusses the idea of a temporal coincidence of means and ends in which the purposes of nonviolent action "were achieved in the very moment of their expression" (Devji 2010, 374).
[18] This is one way to situate Gandhi's obsession with the *charka* (spinning wheel) and, more generally, the idea of constructive work. See also Mehta (2010b, 368–69).

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place sequentially and in shifting contexts, within and through political engagements that are more interactive and iterative, and therefore necessarily more strategic than what is implied in the strong reading of exemplary or principled action.

Discipline and Suffering

If the prioritization of means defines the orientation of *satyagraha*, its substance lies in suffering. For Gandhi, "non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering" ([1920e] 1999, 135). *Tapas/tapasya*, usually translated by Gandhi as both self-suffering and self-discipline, was therefore the distinguishing feature of all modes of nonviolent action and key to their effectiveness.[19] For Gandhi, suffering properly practiced was noncoercive, and its mode of operation forestalled and disrupted the escalating logic of politics. Moreover, the disposition toward sacrifice implied in suffering allowed for self-correction and self-examination, a disciplined humility that was performed and cultivated through detached action. In the disciplined suffering that nonviolent action seeks to dramatize, these aspects coalesce to enable a distinct process of resolution, which Gandhi strikingly termed a dynamic of political *conversion*.

The literal meaning of s*atyagraha* is "truth-force" or the search for and insistence upon truth ([1921b] 1999, 451–52]; [1925c] 1999, 64, 93; cf. Parekh 1989a, 143). Truth, for Gandhi, was absolute and universal; indeed it served as another name for God. At the same time, Gandhian truth lacked any positive, substantive definition; it was a name for an absolute that was in principle unknowable and inaccessible in any final or total sense. Thus, insistence on it went hand in hand with a view of truth as necessarily many-sided (Bondurant 1958, 17). Each individual not only had his or her own path to truth but also knowledge of it was only ever partial and always liable to be incorrect. To recognize fallibility was to accept that people's (partial) views of justice will necessarily conflict, "for what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other" ([1920a] 1999, 206). For Gandhi, "the main reason why violence is eliminated" in *satyagraha* is because the *satyagrahi* (the nonviolent actor) "gives his opponent the same right of independence and feelings of liberty that he reserves to himself, and he will fight by inflicting injuries on his own person" ([1920b] 1999, 217). By turning the onus of action—the responsibility for the consequences of action—inward in this manner, suffering becomes noncoercive in its outward effect. When this kind of truth-force turns out to have mistakenly used (i.e., in a cause that is unjust), then "only the person using it suffers." The disciplined *satyagrahi* does not "make others suffer for his mistakes" ([1909] 1999, 293) and instead turns the consequences of failure inward, into acts of self-examination and correction. Most importantly, suffering functions to interrupt the dynamic of escalation. As Niebuhr thoughtfully noted, by enduring "more suffering than it causes," *satyagraha* "mitigates the resentment" of the political opponent, "resentments which violent conflict always create" (1932, 247).

The charged language of self-suffering has the tendency to evoke heroic, even masochistic, feats of self-abnegation; yet following Niebuhr, self-suffering might be better described as disciplined action—free of personal resentments and ambitions—that demonstrates this detachment through action that involves the willingness to sacrifice (Niebuhr 1932, 246). To suffer meant to fully bear the burdens of acting; it demanded that acts of protest, resistance, and reform involved the sacrifice of something from which one benefits and the risk of severe consequences, from ostracism to violent reaction. In the context of noncooperation with authority, whether in the form of a boycott of state institutions, civil disobedience, or labor strikes and work stoppages, the act would prove most efficacious, most demonstrative of conviction, when the *satyagrahi* visibly sacrificed tangible benefits (in terms of money and prestige) and bore adverse consequences (such as being jailed or fired) in a forthright and disciplined manner.

For Gandhi, the mitigation of resentment was only one side of what made conscious and deliberate suffering effective. Suffering, for Gandhi, "appeals not to the intellect, it pierces the heart," working not by persuading but by *converting* political opponents ([1939] 1999, 196). Conversion was therefore associated with a kind of action that was more affective than intellectual in orientation and effect. Although most directly opposed to coercion, conversion was also contrasted to persuasion and condemnation, where the latter implied modes of argumentation and criticism that inhibited moderation and bred hostility. For Gandhi, as was noted before, reason and rational argument had distinct limits in politics. Reason could easily cover over and engender obstinacy, self-righteousness, and dogmatism. Indeed Gandhi thought that deeply held beliefs and principles were almost always less rational than they might appear, and the intellect worked hardest to supply arguments and proofs for beliefs that had their origins and grounding elsewhere. However, suffering enabled a different kind of reasoning:

> Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason. Nobody has probably drawn up more petitions or espoused more forlorn causes than I, and I have come to this fundamental conclusion that, if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. ([1931] 1999, 48)

Gandhi held that dramatic displays of commitment—through acts of conscious and willed suffering—would effectively weaken entrenched positions. Disciplined and self-effacing action triggered an opening and

[19] "Real suffering bravely borne melts even a heart of stone. Such is the potency of suffering, or *tapas*. And there lies the key to Satyagraha" (Gandhi [1925c] 1999, 18).

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rethinking of commitments, enabling a new form of reason "strengthened by suffering" ([1925b] 1999, 382).

Gandhi was acutely aware that an unrestrained or egotistic politics of conviction was especially liable to engender a logic of escalation. He therefore insisted that nonviolence could not be a movement of "brag, bluster, or bluff," but rather one premised on the cultivation of "unobtrusive humility" ([1921a] 1999, 203). Not bravado or brinkmanship but the performance of self-effacing and self-sacrificing acts would do the political work of demonstrating firmly held political convictions and compelling attention to them. Nonviolence avoids condemnation in the form of criticism and judgment of the actions of others, since "the more it speaks and argues, the less effective it becomes" ([1936] 1999, 402). Rather than enhancing its power through moralizing, the convincing action of the nonviolent agent

> grows most in his opponent when he least interposes his speech between his action and his opponent. Speech, especially when it is haughty, betrays want of confidence and it makes one's opponent skeptical about the reality of the act. Humility therefore is the key to quick success. ([1921a] 1999, 203)

To be effective, acts of suffering required discipline, where discipline meant learning to detach the self from desire for the fruits of action and the egotistic investment in principles. The dispositional training for *satyagraha* therefore required a cultivation of humility and fearlessness, the willingness to sacrifice one's life and an overcoming of the ego's passions and attachments.

Gandhi's repeated prescriptions to be pure and selfless in motive, coupled with his celebration of personal asceticism, have given great cause to view him as a moral absolutist or ethical purist in politics. He certainly extolled a model of moral perfection in which disciplined purity and self-abnegating humility were central modes and avowed aims. Yet these moral virtues also functioned as distinctly *political* dispositions on which the success (and not just the moral legitimacy) of nonviolent action depended. That is, the imperative for detached and disciplined action was not just a way to assert the legitimacy or authenticity of the political act nor a sign of the ethical purity of the actor but also a key determinant of the *anticipated efficacy* of nonviolent action. Purity of motive implied removing all traces of anger and resentment toward one's opponent, as well as personal vanity and ambition vis-à-vis the ends of action, so as not to invite bitterness and antipathy. Selfless suffering likewise was thought to demonstrate the strength of conviction in a nondogmatic manner that interrupted the escalation of mutual hostilities. Therefore, in the context of the theory and practice of nonviolence, the formulation and defense of purity and selflessness, as well as suffering, detachment, humility, and discipline, were avowedly political.

CONTEXTS OF NONVIOLENT ACTION

Gandhian realism takes the fundamental questions about politics to be questions about political action, about how given a particular context and set of practical constraints, one must seek the right means to enable a projected end. Thus far, I have focused on *constraints* in terms of recurring structures of resistance and endemic sources of violence in political contestation. Action also takes place within determinate relationships and encounters, in which individuals and groups confront and engage each other from a given standpoint. Political interactions have a different character and entail differential effects depending on where antagonists find and position themselves, for example, within relations of power, legacies of domination, forms of disagreement, and stages of polarization. Being responsive to these variations in situational standpoints is another reason why the politics of *satyagraha* had to be dynamic, strategic, and contextual.

A central contention of political realism is that *context* is an essential, even determinative, starting point of political action and judgment. The emphasis on context implies a view of politics as always historically and institutionally located and a sense that political decision making—in the face of the brute contingencies and complexities of political life—has to be situational to be effective. In this vein, realists have taken political judgment to be less a theoretical science in which right conduct can be deduced from universal principles and more akin to a skill or art, a form of practical reason that is sensitive to particulars (Galston 2010; Geuss 2010a). One perennial worry with judgment conceived in these terms is that it often leads to the conclusion that politics *requires* making unpleasant moral choices or, indeed, a suspension of moral norms. Emphasizing flexibility and mutability can also make political judgment appear mystical or, worse still, a cover for plain decisionism. Gandhi's understanding of *satyagraha* offers more defined parameters or precepts for determining the appropriate course of action in given contexts. It suggests that one can think more constructively about paradigmatic contexts of political conflicts and the kinds of political responses they demand, thereby helping navigate the terrain between morally strict categorical imperatives and morally lax decisionism. Gandhian *satyagraha* was especially attuned to structural and historical relations of power and the sequences and stages of polarization that framed contestation between antagonists and potential allies.

There is a tendency to take civil disobedience, particularly the Indian anticolonial campaign against British rule, as the exemplary instance of *satyagraha*, to which one should turn to tease out its conceptual underpinnings. Although commentators will refer to Gandhi's other campaigns of the time, such as the campaigns against untouchability and for Hindu–Muslim unity, they often take them to be indicative of Gandhi's progressive social views rather than as themselves theoretically significant examples of nonviolent politics in action.[20] Against this tendency, Skaria (2002) has reformulated the category of *ahimsa* as a set of

[20] The exemplary status of the nonviolent movement for *swaraj* also stems from its historic successes in contrast to the ambiguity and controversy over the impact of Gandhi's other campaigns. Whereas

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broad-ranging practices of neighborliness that seek to create, reform, and sustain political relationships in accordance with Gandhian notions of justice and equality. Skaria rightly conceptualizes *ahimsa* as less a static position than an ongoing activity, a "rigorous politics" that works through different and distinct modes of *tapasya* to produce the conditions of neighborliness (957). In this vein, Skaria offers a very suggestive typology for distinguishing forms of nonviolent action in terms of the structural relationship between political partners and antagonists. In his view, nonviolent action is differently enacted when practiced vis-à-vis political superiors, equals, or inferiors/subalterns. Against dominators, or superiors, one would enact a politics of confrontation, resistance, and civil disobedience; with equals, one sought political friendship; with the subaltern, one would demonstrate service and seek atonement (957, 976–81). Here I connect this typology to Gandhi's own twofold differentiation between *destructive* and *constructive satyagraha* and the more abstract contrast he drew between relations with a *tyrant* versus those with a *lover*.

Destructive and Constructive *Satyagraha*

Destructive *satyagraha* revolves around the tactics of civil disobedience and noncooperation. It is a mode of militant and direct political action against unjust laws or an unjust political order, an order with which you are in, or place yourself in, an antagonistic relationship. By contrast, constructive nonviolent action is driven less by an urgency to resist, withdraw, or undo existing political authority than by the need to create political bonds and forms of association and authority on a voluntary and noncoercive basis. Constructive action can also function as a form of political judgment, linked to an ethics of effective leadership, of how to make alliances and coalitions, overcome divisions, and solve political disagreement. In constructive *satyagraha*, we see most clearly how nonviolence was not merely a negative recipe for resistance but the grounds for generative political action.

Nonviolent resistance in the form of mass civil disobedience and noncooperation is the clearest example of Gandhi's belief that political authority was ultimately based not on force alone but on some kind of consent, however minimal or unconscious. For Gandhi, the very machinery of modern government necessarily relied on the extensive cooperation of subjects: "Every citizen silently but none-the-less certainly sustains the Government of the day in ways of which he has no knowledge. Every citizen renders himself responsible of every act of government" ([1920d] 1999, 94). Gandhi's radical account of responsibility served to make visible the individual's active (even if unwitting) collusion in the production of authority and thus his or her inherent power and liberty to reject or revise the conditions of consent. The fact that "less than a hundred thousand white men should be able to rule three hundred and fifty million Indians" ([1920g] 1999, 279–80) offered proof that British rule was unthinkable without Indian collaboration. It also attested to its inherent instability (and that of all political regimes) when the actions of government become corrupt, unjust, or otherwise intolerable. "In politics," Gandhi insisted, the use of *satyagraha* "is based upon the immutable maxim, that government of the people is possible only so long as they consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed" ([1914] 1999, 217). Therefore unjust laws and regimes can be radically destabilized by acts of withdrawal of that consent, through a politics of active noncooperation with authority.

At one level, constructive *satyagraha* was the necessary flipside of nonviolent resistance and noncooperation; it entailed the active creation of new modes of individual and collective self-rule to redeem and reconstitute the political space made available by withdrawal. For Gandhi, in the context of Indian anticolonial politics, the exemplary site for experimenting with constructive *satyagraha* was the platform of village reform and revitalization known as the "Constructive Programme." The constructive program was a multifaceted program of social reform that, in its more radical turns, aimed at something like a nonviolent social revolution. It came to enfold an expanding set of social, cultural, and economic reform campaigns—from the promotion of *khadi* (home-spun cloth) and cottage industries, the abolition of untouchability, and the striving for communal harmony to campaigns for sanitation, education, and prohibition ([1941] 1999). The constructive program was often criticized, especially from within the Congress, for being nonpolitical. It was charged with distracting Gandhi and Congress politics from the goal of capturing state power, for being obscurantist and traditional (this claim was especially directed at the *khadi* campaign), and for instigating social division when national unity was deemed most urgent (i.e., on the issue of untouchability). However, for Gandhi, in this precise form—centered around village renewal and protection—constructive work was the necessary counterpart to the anticolonial demand. To attain *swaraj*, the strategy of noncooperation had to be twinned with a positive program of constructing nonviolent forms of rule, authority, and association. In this sense, the constructive program functioned as political preparation for independence, as itself a series of experiments in self-rule.

Moreover, the forms of *satyagraha* envisioned in the constructive program were also meant to highlight the centrality of, and intimate a model for, the everyday practice of nonviolent politics.[21] These

Gandhi's critique of untouchability is considered to have been important and consequential (exactly how consequential and the character of that influence are, however, subject to continuing debate), the attempt at forging Hindu–Muslim solidarity is generally taken to have been a more striking failure.

[21] In a 1938 speech to Ghaffar Khan's *Khudai Khidmatgars*, the famous nonviolent movement of the Northwest Frontier Province, Gandhi reiterated the importance of ordinary forms of constructive *satyagraha* in the following terms: "Our civil disobedience or non-co-operation, by its very nature, was not meant to be practiced for

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campaigns explicitly eschewed state action or legislation as the means for effecting radical social and economic reform; indeed this rejection is what rendered these campaigns nonviolent. If Gandhi was suspicious of the legitimacy and efficacy of state-directed legislation in general, he thought that the problem of coercive or imposed reform would be most acute in the arena of social and economic life. Imposed reform would not only produce reaction and resentment but also threaten to induce a scale of polarization that could instigate widespread civil conflict and even outright civil war. Gandhi's proposed antidote to the potential escalating spiral of ideological conflict inherent in communal, intercaste, and economic conflict was the radical localization of the arena of struggle for reform. While national in scope, the constructive program was to be conducted as village-level campaigns. For Gandhi, entrenched forms of economic and social oppression (for example, stemming from land distribution and caste inequality) required engagement at an intimate scale, because intimacy set the conditions for conscious atonement and resisted the abstracting logic of ideological competition and stalemate. In a positive sense, localized constructive nonviolence taught *satyagrahis* to orient themselves toward the reform of that with which they were most intimate; that is, it insisted that political action began from the situatedness of the self in its most intimate worlds.

One of the most striking examples of constructive *satyagraha* in the realm of political judgment and political leadership was Gandhi's understanding of the conditions for forging Hindu–Muslim unity. Although the creation of greater Hindu–Muslim unity was a central plank of the constructive program, it was by all accounts a deep political failure both for Gandhi and Congress politics, evidenced in the polarizations that resulted in partition. Yet it was Gandhi's involvement with the pan-Islamic Khilafat movement (1919–24) that had initially elevated him to a position of national leadership in the first major mobilizations against British rule. The Khilafat campaign eventually dovetailed with the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), and the period is often taken to be the heyday of Hindu–Muslim solidarity. Despite its later unraveling, the distinctive formula that Gandhi articulated in the period as the basis for Hindu–Muslim unity and friendship remains provocative. Skaria (2002) and Devji (2005) have both drawn attention to the novelty of Gandhi's formulation of political friendship as one that is performed through *unconditional* acts of solidarity. Rather than a strategic alliance of interest, based on a kind of quid pro quo—in which, for instance, Hindu support for the Khilafat demand would be tied to Muslim acceptance of a ban on cow slaughter—Gandhi attempted to "win permanent friendship with Mussulmans" in "a spirit of love and sacrifice independent of expectation of any return" ([1920f] 1999, 119). What Gandhi proposed was not primarily an ideology (or national narrative) that could convince Hindus and Muslims that they shared political interests and goals (or that they already formed a single political community) but a mechanism that could disarm growing enmity and escalating distrust:

> When men become obstinate, it is a difficult thing. If I pull one way, my Moslem brother will pull another. If I put on superior airs, he will return the compliment. If I bow to him gently, he will do it much more so; and if, he does not, I shall not be considered to have done wrong in having bowed. When the Hindus became insistent, the killing of cows increased. In my opinion, cow-protection societies may be considered cow-killing societies. ([1909] 1999, 272)

Here we see the central mechanisms of *satyagraha*, suffering and sacrifice, mobilized toward creating the conditions for mutual respect, trust, and equality. Moreover, this attempt required a sensitivity to the nature of the structural and historical relationship between Hindus and Muslims. Thus, the "heart unity" that Gandhi sought could not ignore or deny the difference in status and interests of each community; indeed it was premised on the heightened duty of the Hindu community as the majority community to "surrender out of strength to the Mussalman in every mundane matter" ([1925a] 1999, 159). Trying to create the conditions of unity—overcoming mutual distrust and feelings of superiority/inferiority or insecurity—was, for Gandhi, "essentially the work of Hindus" ([1921c] 1999, 18). That is, it was incumbent on those in positions of power, strength, and security to both accept their responsibility for enmity and actively seek its undoing.[22]

Context and Coercion

Thus, the techniques as well as the dispositional politics of *satyagraha* had a different valence depending on the context of encounter. Even the most militant forms of resistance had to take a specific form to produce the right effect and transform structures of political conflict and political authority. As noted earlier, Gandhi saw proper acts of *satyagraha* as dramatizing self-suffering; resisters had to show that in acts of withdrawal they consciously sacrifice something from which they benefit and "voluntarily put up with the losses and inconveniences that arise from having to withdraw" ([1920c] 1999, 399). Although the aim and form of resistance

all time. But the fight which we are today putting up through our constructive nonviolence has validity for all time; it is the real thing" ([1938] 1999, 146).

[22] Gandhi's formula for Hindu–Muslim friendship was most explicit and arguably most effective during the Khilafat campaign. Although never renounced, it was never again given such prominence nor practiced so publicly in Congress politics. There were, however, some meager attempts: consider Gandhi's offer to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League and founder of Pakistan, of the prime ministership as a way to ward off partition in the eleventh hour. More interestingly, Rajagopalachari, one of Gandhi's closest political associates, argued for various forms of compromise on the question of Pakistan, from accepting the League resolution of 1940 to a lifelong campaign to resolve the Kashmir despite. Rajagopalachari often formulated these various acts of reconciliation in Gandhian terms, as unilateral acts of friendship meant to dissolve suspicion and fear; his striking maxim for peace with Pakistan was "not peace at any cost but friendship at any price." On this, see Srinivasan's excellent study (2009, 9, 139–44, 163–74).

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were intended to break the machinery of government, this end was not to be attained through instilling fear, intimidating, embarrassing, or otherwise humiliating the government into submission:

> This battle of non-cooperation is a programme of propaganda by reducing profession to practice, not one of compelling others to yield obedience by violence direct or indirect. We must try patiently to convert our opponents. If we wish to evolve the sprit of democracy out of slavery, we must be scrupulously exact in our dealings with opponents. We may not replace the slavery of the Government by that of the non-co-operationists. We must concede to our opponents the freedom we claim for ourselves and for which we are fighting. ([1920h] 1999, 66)

Gandhi insisted that if the price for acting was borne primarily by the *satyagrahi*, then whatever coercion existed was internally directed and thus not a form of violence against the opponent. To demonstrate this quality of nonviolence, Gandhi often invoked a distinction between forms of political boycott in which one legitimately withdrew support from an unjust institution (i.e., through disobeying or ignoring the laws of the village headman or district collector) and extreme forms of social boycott that would deny social services or otherwise ostracize or intimidate these same officials. In *satyagraha* one did not punish the wrongdoer as such; rather one "must combat the wrong by ceasing to assist the wrong-doer" ([1920c] 1999, 399). Gandhi deemed punishment to be outright coercion and hence illegitimate. Moreover, in terming the act "coercive" Gandhi also considered it to be politically ineffective because it targeted individuals rather than institutions and, importantly, accelerated the given dynamics of entrenchment.

There has always been a great deal of controversy about whether the logic of nonviolent protest, especially in its most confrontational moments, actually works in this way or whether it necessarily succeeds on the back of another kind of coercion.[23] Gandhi himself declared *satyagraha* to be a militant and not passive form of resistance, often invoking military metaphors to describe the tactics and discipline of his nonviolent army. It is also clear that in the context of opposing manifestly unjust regimes (i.e., when a regime is deemed incapable of internal reform as was the case, in Gandhi's view, of British rule in India after the Amritsar massacre[24]) escalation would become a conscious strategy. At the same time, even in the context of the broadest calls for general noncooperation, escalation took place in precise stages and had to be tied to specific demands, demands that could be reasonably negotiated or met by opponents. Pure escalation could never become a goal of its own. Thus, at every stage of confrontation, demands had to be publicly declared, justified, and circulated, and avenues for negotiated settlements (including face-saving measures) had to be kept open (Bondurant 1958, 40). Acts of disobedience and resistance, in addition to being disciplined and defined, thus were meant to work less through humiliating or triumphing over an enemy but by producing conditions for progressive and iterative resolutions.

Context mattered not only in the general sense that it shaped the aims and methods of political action but also in that any particular tactic or technique could be felt as coercive, depending on the specific structure and sequence of confrontation. Gandhi took great pains to establish and justify the precise conditions in which nonviolent tactics could be deployed without inducing escalation or enacting coercion. He devoted enormous energy to clarifying, calibrating, and outlining the exact conditions of disciplined *satyagraha*; indeed these searching examinations were a central feature of his voluminous writings (especially in his in-house journals, *Navajivan, Young India*, and *Harijan*). These responses ranged very broadly, from detailing exacting rituals of daily self-discipline; differentiating retaliatory and productive forms of boycotts, strikes, and work stoppages; to distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate grievances of *satyagrahis* in prison. Despite Gandhi's careful calibrations of the fine line between coercion and conversion, they often appeared to his critics to be little more than sophistries, and the charge that nonviolence necessarily works through moral coercion has continued to shadow it.

To gauge how complicated the issue of coercion was and how crucial the contexts of political conflict were, for Gandhi, in shaping it, I refer here briefly to perhaps the most controversial tactic in Gandhi's political repertoire and one that most often was seen as morally coercive: the political fast or hunger strike. The majority of Gandhi's fasts were personal acts of self-purification, penance, prayer, and remembrance. Even many of his more public fasts are best understood as acts of self-purification after political failures, to atone for falling short of his own ideals and the lapses of his followers (i.e., when he felt responsible for outbreaks of violence) (Gandhi 2008, 827–31). However, Gandhi did also fast for straightforwardly political reasons, to influence the course of events, most famously as the prelude to the Poona Pact of 1932 and to quell communal riots at partition. He was acutely aware that fasts could very easily be coercive, and thus he elaborated precise and demanding rules for their undertaking. A fast was always to be a weapon of last resort, used only after all other avenues had been exhausted. To attest to how reluctant Gandhi was to carry out this tactic, it is worth remembering that he at no time fasted against the British government or British rule as such, and never in the name of an open-ended demand for

[23] Although Gandhi was insistent that truly nonviolent action was noncoercive, even his defenders question the plausibility of this claim. Bondurant (1958) explicitly and positively terms the moral force of *satyagraha* as working through "nonviolent coercion" (9–11). Howes (2009) argues that Gandhi underestimates the "intersubjective violence" that nonviolence necessarily effects (122). Here, I want to trace Gandhi's understanding of why he thought nonviolence could in principle be noncoercive without entering into the important question of whether *in fact* this has been in case in its actual enactment.

[24] The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, Punjab, in April 1919 was a key catalyst of the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), the first major mass nonviolent campaign calling for Indian self-rule.

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independence. For Gandhi, fasting against a political antagonist or enemy functioned only to escalate bitterness and conflict, because one's enemy would necessarily experience the fast as exhortative and coercive. One could not "fast against a tyrant" but only against those whose consciences could be stirred by the willingness to sacrifice one's life ([1933a] 1999, 377). Only in the context of that kind of relationship—Gandhi called it a relationship of love—would fasting work as moral suasion and not as sheer blackmail. The categories of *tyrant* and *lover* had, for Gandhi, "a general application. The one who does injustice is styled 'tyrant.' The one who is in sympathy with you is the 'lover.'" The true *satyagraha* fast "should be against the lover and for his reform, not for extorting rights from him" ([1924a] 1999, 323). This does not mean that in practice all of Gandhi's fasts conformed to these strict criteria; indeed Gandhi himself admitted his own lapses in this regard. But it does vividly demonstrate the degree to which Gandhi was attuned to the ambiguities of moral coercion in nonviolent resistance and, more importantly, how for Gandhi the question of the appropriate uses of nonviolent action in general was closely tied to an assessment of the contexts and dynamics of specific political confrontations.

CONCLUSION: FROM NORMS TO ACTION

At its core, realism asks us to confront the question of what is *given*—immutable and endemic—in politics. In the tradition of moderating or liberal realism,the given is often linked to aspects of human nature and psychology, to passions and interests that are viewed as perhaps partially tamable but never wholly overcome. Montesquieu, Hume, and Madison based their political analyses on a motivational realism of this kind and thereby rejected the view that politics and political institutions ought to require or depend on great transformations of fundamental human passions. Such attempts to reshape, educate, or suppress human nature would either be foolhardy or dangerous. Instead, workable political institutions had to take into account and constrain (in indirect ways) the inevitable play of pride and self-interest in politics.

Gandhi's politics were also premised on an understanding of the crucial role of passions such as pride and self-regard in politics, yet he was straightforwardly a moral perfectionist. In this respect, the pertinent distinction or question was not *whether* but *how* political passions can be constrained. Gandhi did not look to political institutions to check, harness, or moderate the most unstable and dangerous passions. Institutions were untrustworthy in this regard and more often than not effected reform and discipline through coercion. Rather, moderation was to be sought "in and through action," in *satyagraha* as a distinct form of disciplined, self-limiting action. Ultimately, for Gandhian realism the question of the given is less about marking a line between what can and cannot be changed than the necessary starting point for the work of politics. In other words, Gandhi's realism rests not in disavowing the transformative possibilities in and of politics but in insisting that political action has to begin from, and work outward from, the givens—the situated contexts and inherent dangers—of political life. And it is in this respect that Gandhian realism serves as an instructive example of exactly the kind of realist reversal in the directionality of political theorizing that scholars such as Geuss and Williams have recommended.

The key lies in Gandhi's central focus on the question of action, especially the manner in which the question of *means* is taken as the fundamental problem of and for politics. The Gandhian imperative to construct nonviolent means not only puts into sharp relief the ethical and practical dilemmas of political violence but it also prioritizes action and contexts of action in a manner that works to helpfully displace and reformulate realism's normative bind. The traditional dilemma about normativity—about the relationship between *is* and *ought*—arises partly because of a prior framing and implicit assumption that political theorizing primarily concerns itself with the constitution, generation, and justification of norms. If that is the perspective from which one views the realism/idealism debate, then realism may well come up short. But if we were to shift the is/ought question from the domain of *norms* to that of *action*, the issue is no longer one of how normative guidelines (the *ought*) can be derived from the web of existing beliefs and constraints (the *is*), which can admittedly pose fundamental challenges for the practice of criticism. Rather, the question becomes one of interrogating the conditions and mechanisms by which we can move from the world as it is to the world as it ought to be. That is, from the standpoint of political action, the *is/ought* question is reconfigured as a *means/ends* question, one in which the tighter imbrication of the normative and the empirical that realism recommends can be enabling rather than constrictive. In Gandhi, we can see how tethering political potentiality to the given constraints of political life does not entail an a priori restriction on imaginative possibilities; it only insists on scrupulous attention to the means of working out from and through these constraints toward envisioned ends. In this form of realism, the ends and goals of political life may even be high-minded, demanding, and radical (as surely many of Gandhi's were), but the means for the effectuation of norms cannot be left unspecified and, hence, unreal. In this manner, with Gandhi, political realism can perhaps be rescued from its association with amoral instrumentalism and status quo politics and instead be viewed as offering an alternative way of thinking pointedly and precisely about the conditions for effective and principled political action.

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